The New York Times
Book Review
April 12, 1992
Section 7

MARIE E VINE

"At Weddings and Wakes," a novel by Alice McDermott. Page 3.

Ultimate Insider, Ultimate Outsider

THE CHAIRMAN
John J. McCloy: The Making of the American Establishment.
By Kai Bird.
Illustrated. 800 pp. New York: Simon & Schuster. $30.

By Joseph Finder

THE journalist Richard Rovere was once challenged to name the chairman of the Establishment, that predominantly WASP ruling class that for decades had steered American domestic and foreign policy. He pondered for a while. "Suddenly the right name sprang to my lips. 'John J. McCloy,' " Rovere declared. "My God, how could I have hesitated?"

It was a logical choice: John J. McCloy, the friend and adviser to nine Presidents, the Wall Street lawyer par excellence, the chairman of the Council on Foreign Relations (emblematic institution of the Establishment if ever there was one), the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the Chase Manhattan Bank, the president of the World Bank, the virtual dictator of postwar Germany for three years as commissioner of occupied Germany, a member of the Warren Commission . . . and the résumé goes on and on. Named in C. Wright Mills's influential 1957 book, "The Power Elite," as part of that group's "inner core," a lifelong Republican who did his most significant work for Democratic Presidents, McCloy was the behind-the-scenes power broker, the *éminence grise* who for years embodied the American governing class.

A short, stocky, bald, plain man, an unprepossessing figure, McCloy was, by most accounts, less than brilliant — and yet, as Dean

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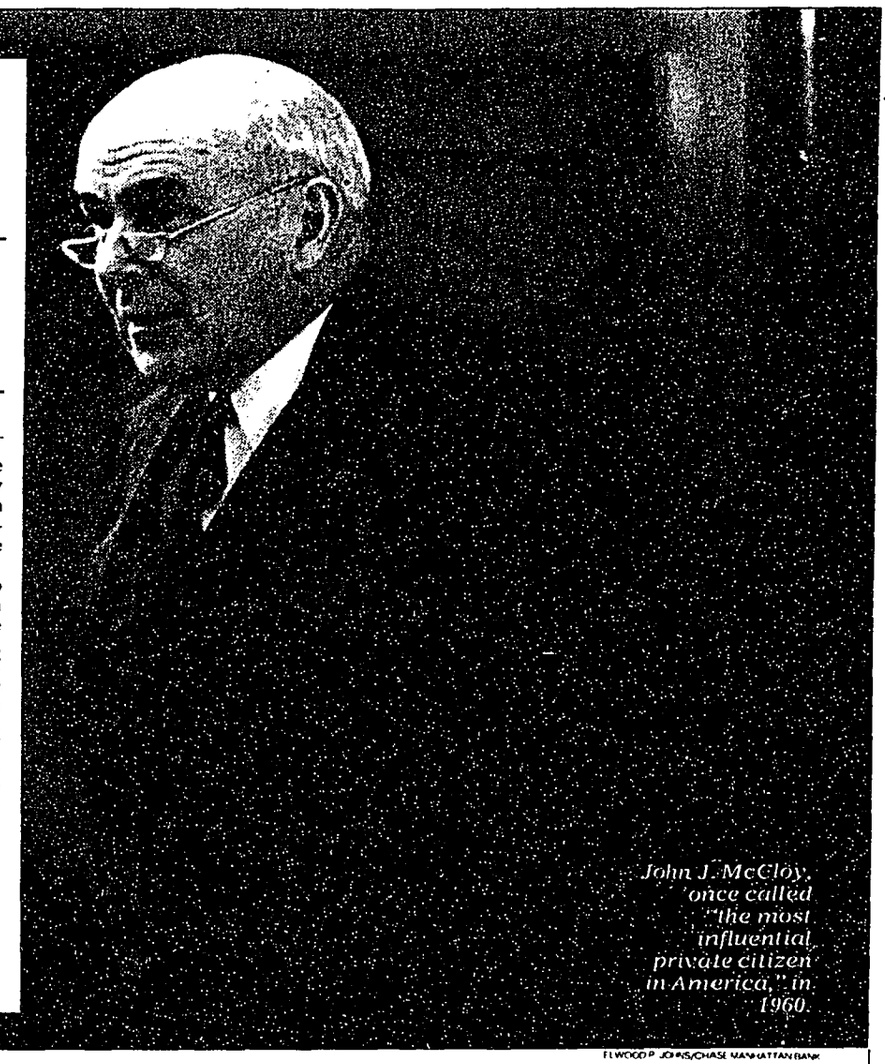
Joseph Finder, the author of "The Moscow Club," a novel, and "Red Carpet: The Connection Between the Kremlin and America's Most Powerful Businessmen," writes frequently about international affairs.



John J. McCloy, once called "the most influential private citizen in America," in 1960.

ELWOOD P. JOHNS/CHASE MANHATTAN BANK

The Men Who Pulled the Triggers

ORDINARY MEN
Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland.
By Christopher R. Browning.
Illustrated. 231 pp. New York: Aaron Asher Books/HarperCollins Publishers. $22.

By Walter Reich

We know a lot about how the Germans carried out the Holocaust. We know much less about how they felt and what they thought as they did it, how they were affected by what they did, and what made it possible for them to do it. In fact, we know remarkably little about the ordinary Germans who made the Holocaust happen — not the desk murderers in Berlin, not the Eichmanns and Heydrichs, and not Hitler and Himmler, but the tens of thousands of conscripted soldiers and policemen from all walks of life, many of them middle-aged, who rounded up millions of Jews and methodically shot them, one by one, in forests, ravines and ditches, or stuffed them, one by one, into cattle cars and guarded those cars on their way to the gas chambers.

In his finely focused and stunningly powerful book, "Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland," Christopher R. Browning tells us about such Germans and helps us understand, better than we did before, not only what they did to make the Holocaust happen but also how they were transformed psychologically from the ordinary men of his title into active participants in the most monstrous crime in human history. In doing so he aims a penetrating searchlight on the human capacity for utmost evil and leaves us staring at his subject matter with the shock of knowledge and the lurking fear of self-recognition.

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Walter Reich, a psychiatrist, is a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington and the author of "A Stranger in My House: Jews and Arabs in the West Bank."

Harrison E. Salisbury on 'Losing' China/**7**

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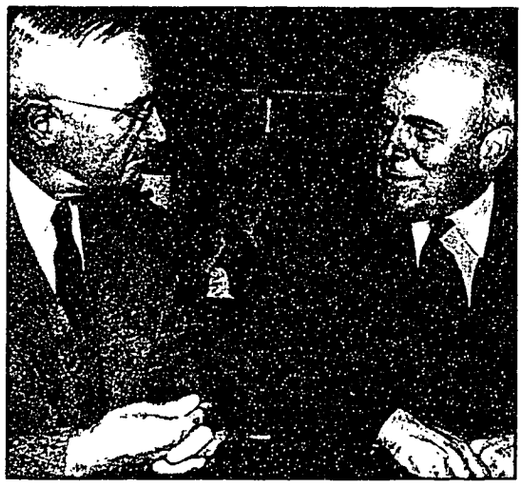
Acheson observed, he had "an expansive, happy nature with no littleness, suspicion or jealousy about it," as well as a knack for working easily with difficult personalities.

John J. McCloy had an extraordinary influence on the course of this century, but three years after his death at the age of 93 his name has been all but forgotten by the general public. "The Chairman" by Kai Bird, a contributing editor of The Nation, is the first biography of the man Harper's Magazine once called "the most influential private citizen in America." Although McCloy was said to have feared that this account — 10 years in the making — would be hostile, it is exhaustively researched and remarkably evenhanded.

The great paradox of McCloy's life was that the Establishment's chairman of the board was in fact born poor — on the wrong side of the tracks, as he often put it. His strong-willed mother supported her family as a hairdresser, "doing heads" of Philadelphia society ladies. She managed to send her son to boarding school, Amherst College and Harvard Law School. The young McCloy seems to have been possessed of a genius for knowing which circles to move in. Affable and diligent, he gained entree to ranks of society from which he would have otherwise been excluded, in part by becoming a star tennis player.

McCloy, always keenly aware of being an outsider, was fond of relating an incident from his youth that came to attain an almost totemic resonance. As a college student, prompted by his mother, he walked up to the door of the Rockefeller mansion at Seal Harbor, Me., and asked for a job; the butler slammed the door in his face. Soon after, McCloy somehow managed to secure a position teaching sailing to the Rockefeller children, including Nelson and David, both of whom were later central to his career.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

John J. McCloy, United States High Commissioner for Germany, right, with President Harry S. Truman, 1950.

McCloy had a genius for knowing which circles to move in.

He became a well-regarded corporate attorney at several New York law firms and joined all the right clubs. Recruited to Washington by Franklin D. Roosevelt's Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, McCloy was eventually appointed Assistant Secretary of War. Like Woody Allen's Zelig, he seemed to turn up everywhere — smoking cigars with Churchill amid the ruins of the House of Commons; consulting with Charles de Gaulle, George Patton and George Marshall; participating in the discussions over whether to drop the atomic bomb on Japan.

BEFORE then, it had fallen to him to make one of the most difficult decisions of World War II, certainly one of the most controversial decisions of his career. As Mr. Bird writes, he was responsible "more than any other individual" for getting the President to issue the infamous Executive Order 9066, calling for the resettlement of more than 100,000 Japanese-Americans from the West Coast to "relocation centers" (or, as Roosevelt more bluntly called them, "concentration camps"). McCloy justified the decision by proclaiming, "If it is a question of safety of the country, [or] the Constitution of the United States, why, the Constitution is just a scrap of paper to me."

Mr. Bird discloses, too, that at least as early as 1943 McCloy was one of the very few in Washington who had information about Hitler's proposed Final Solution and who had the power to do something about it. Yet he refused to believe that the Nazis were systematically exterminating the Jews. (As Mr. Bird points out, McCloy's skepticism was shared by, among others, Felix Frankfurter and Walter Lippmann, both Jews.)

As Stimson's liaison to the War Review Board,

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McCloy opposed a plan to bomb the railways leading to the death camps, on the ground that it would have diverted precious resources and would have been useless in any case. Mr. Bird maintains that it would have saved some 100,000 Jews at Auschwitz from being gassed, and that McCloy "bears substantial responsibility for this misjudgment." Whether the bombing would have saved these Jews remains a matter of fierce dispute.

In March 1945 Roosevelt greeted McCloy in the Oval Office with arm extended in a Nazi salute, saying, "Heil McCloy — Hochkommissar für Deutschland." McCloy declined the position, urging that Roosevelt pick a military man. But when Harry S. Truman offered him the same job four years later, he finally accepted, thus entering one of the most controversial periods of his long career.

As High Commissioner for occupied Germany, McCloy granted clemency to dozens of Nazi war criminals. He freed, or reduced the sentences of, most of the 20 SS extermination squad leaders, whose crimes he freely conceded were "historic in their magnitude and horror." Of the 15 death sentences handed down at the Nuremberg trials, McCloy carried out a mere five. Of the remaining 74 war criminals who were sentenced at Nuremberg to prison terms, he let many go free — most notoriously the industrialist Alfried Krupp, who had been sentenced at Nuremberg to 12 years in prison for using concentration camp inmates as slave labor. Krupp, accompanied by most of his board of directors, walked out of the Landsberg prison in 1951 to a cheering crowd and a champagne breakfast — with his fortune and industrial empire intact.

Much of the world was outraged. "Why," Eleanor Roosevelt wrote to McCloy, "are we freeing so many Nazis?" The answer, Mr. Bird explains, was far from simple. For one thing, McCloy faced threats on his own life, and immense pressure from the German public and even from Pope Pius XII to grant a blanket amnesty — "a well-organized conspiracy," McCloy recalled, "to intimidate me."

But the chief reason, according to Mr. Bird, was *Realpolitik* pure and simple, the Larger Considerations: the onset of the Korean War had made more important than ever a pro-American West Germany, rearmed and thus a bulwark against the Russians. The Truman Administration, and McCloy in particular, did not want to undermine our staunchest friend, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer of West Germany. This meant, apparently, appeasing West German public opinion as much as possible and gaining the support of the most prominent West German industrialists. With the fate of the West in the balance, what did a few Nazi war criminals matter?

Moreover, Adenauer's men were not reluctant to use blackmail, telling McCloy that if the Nazis imprisoned in Landsberg were hanged, "Germany as an armed ally against the East was an illusion." As one I. G. Farben executive whom McCloy freed remarked acidly, "Now that they have Korea on their hands, the Americans are a lot more friendly."

After the war, and a quarter-century after the Rockefellers' butler had shut the door in McCloy's face, Nelson Rockefeller recruited McCloy as a name partner in the New York law firm of Milbank, Tweed (whose chief client was the Chase Bank). He was now officially in the Rockefeller fold. In time, the Rockefeller family made him chairman of Chase, with the implicit understanding that he was to groom the young David Rockefeller to take over.

Never rich himself, McCloy had become a reliable trouble-shooter for the rich. "His status in the company of such men of wealth was not that of an equal," Mr. Bird acutely points out, "but these uncrowned members of the American aristocracy depended upon his legal talents to insulate their wealth and social status from the uncertainties of a democratic republic."

By the late 1950's, when Richard Rovere identified him as the chairman of the Establishment, McCloy was regularly attending intimate stag dinners at the White House as a member of Dwight D. Eisenhower's "unofficial Cabinet." John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, both outsiders to the Establishment, recognized the importance of cultivating the chairman. As President Kennedy's disarmament adviser, McCloy negotiated the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba; he was one of the "Wise Men" recruited by McGeorge Bundy in 1965 to advise President Johnson on Vietnam policy (but really to secure Eastern Establishment backing for the war). Johnson, who felt awkward around patrician types, was told by Mr. Bundy (no stranger to the patriciate himself) that "the key to these people is McCloy," who "belongs to the class of people who take their orders from Presidents and nobody else." When McCloy and his friends in the Council on Foreign Relations refused to side publicly with the President on Vietnam, Johnson bitterly complained, "The Establishment bastards have bailed out."

CHASE MANHATTAN ARCHIVES/FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Richard Nixon and John J. McCloy in 1985 at McCloy's 90th birthday party.

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Throughout the late 1960's and the 70's, McCloy continued to exert an enormous influence on American foreign policy. In 1979, when David Rockefeller and Henry Kissinger began pressing the Carter Administration to admit the deposed Shah of Iran to the United States for medical treatment (actually, for asylum), they asked McCloy to orchestrate the extensive lobbying effort. His motivations were not entirely disinterested: Milbank, Tweed provided legal counsel to the Shah, who also had billions of dollars on deposit with Chase. Every Christmas, the Shah sent his friend Jack McCloy five pounds of Beluga caviar.

The reputation of the American ruling elite barely survived the turmoil of the 60's, and late in his life McCloy came to be regarded increasingly as the Establishment archdemon, the master manipulator. His role in the Japanese internment and his role in the decision not to bomb Auschwitz were now seen in the unflattering light of historical revisionism.

Despite the range of John J. McCloy's accomplishments, one suspects that his name is little known today because he wanted it that way. He realized early on that the key to his influence was his *lack* of public visibility, and he ceded the limelight to the larger egos. Unlike some of his more flamboyant peers — Stimson, Acheson, Frankfurter, Averell Harriman, Allen Dulles — he wasn't a larger-than-life personality; he was, perhaps deliberately, ever the colorless lawyer. Unlike, say, Walter Lippmann, he was no intellectual. He was the earnest working-class boy who had, by dint of hard work, tireless public service and a not inconsiderable gift for schmoozing, managed to make his way into the Establishment's inner circle.

And it is here that "The Chairman" disappoints. We do not really get a sense of McCloy as a flesh-and-blood character; we aren't given the opportunity to explore the tensions, the sociological nuances, of the ultimate insider who was really the ultimate outsider — the poor boy, as James Reston has written, who lived "most of his life among the rich." We see the paradoxes of his life, but we don't understand the contradictions within the man.

Still, Mr. Bird's range of sources is quite impressive, including scores of interviews and hundreds of Government documents that were declassified under the Freedom of Information Act, and his assessments are judicious. Although "The Chairman" lacks the telling detail and anecdotal texture of another recent book that treats McCloy and his circle, "The Wise Men" by Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, it will certainly join the ranks of those accounts essential to a full understanding of how politics in this century was conducted behind the scenes.

In his last days, his power ebbing, McCloy had become a "jovial gnome," as Henry Kissinger once called him, with a trying "penchant for anecdotes." At the age of 86 he happily accepted an invitation to testify before a Congressional commission investigating the wartime internment of the Japanese-Americans, expecting the deference normally accorded an elder statesman. Instead he was attacked; when he described the conditions in the camps as "very pleasant," he was greeted with loud laughter from spectators at the hearing. This man who had made so many of the crucial decisions of a turbulent century, this symbol of the American Establishment, was now a relic of a bygone era.

Yet in the light of what we have lived through, at least since Watergate, it has become fashionable in certain circles to wax nostalgic for the good old days when our leaders who guided us into the American Century were drawn primarily from a close-knit social circle imbued with an ethic of public service and noblesse oblige. The mixed record of John J. McCloy may help temper that nostalgia, suggesting that perhaps, for all its many virtues, the American Establishment may have borne within itself the seeds of its own decline and fall. □